

Tibet Oral History Project

Interview #20U – Tsering Dolma
April 1, 2017

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INTERVIEW SUMMARY SHEET

1. Interview Number: #20U
2. Interviewee: Tsering Dolma
3. Age: 87
4. Date of Birth: 1930
5. Sex: Female
6. Birthplace: Phenpo
7. Province: Utsang
8. Year of leaving Tibet: 1957
9. Date of Interview: April 1, 2017
10. Place of Interview: Gepheling Old People's Home, Rajpur, Uttarakhand, India
11. Length of Interview: 0 hr 47 min
12. Interviewer: Marcella Adamski
13. Interpreter: Tenzin Yangchen
14. Videographer: Tenzin Choenyi
15. Translator: Tenzin Yangchen

Biographical Information:

Tsering Dolma was born in Phenpo, Utsang Province in 1930. She was raised by her grandparents and began grazing cows at a young age. As a result of her grandparents' poor health, she had to perform a labor tax on their behalf, starting at the age of 13. The tax was imposed by a large estate owned by the local monastery, who leased land to all the villagers. The labor tax involved work inside the estate home and in their fields.

The tenants were also required to pay the estate with the crops harvested from the leased land. The field belonging to Tsering Dolma's grandparents did not yield enough crops to pay the full amount so they had to take out loans, which resulted in high compounded interest. Tsering Dolma recalls that just before the invasion of Tibet His Holiness the Dalai Lama decreed that interest on loans be written off.

Tsering Dolma was given away in marriage at the age of 17 or 18. She went to live with her husband's family, but had to continue serving labor tax on their behalf. She and her husband decided to go on a pilgrimage to India at same time His Holiness the Dalai Lama and the Panchen Lama did. The Indian Government generously allowed pilgrims to travel on the trains without charge. Tsering Dolma never returned to Tibet because the Dalai Lama went into exile in India before she completed her pilgrimage.

Topics Discussed:

Utsang, childhood memories, taxes, servitude, pilgrimage, life as a refugee in India.

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Interview #20U

Interviewee: Tsering Dolma

Age: 87, Sex: Female

Interviewer: Marcella Adamski

Interview Date: April 1, 2017

Question: Please tell us your name.

00:00:13

Interviewee #20U: I am called Tsering Dolma. Tsering Dolma.

Q: His Holiness the Dalai Lama asked us to record your experiences, so that we can share your memories with many generations of Tibetans, the Chinese and the rest of the world. Your memories will help us to document the true history, culture and beliefs of the Tibetan people. Do you give your permission for the Tibet Oral History Project to use this interview?

#20U: How?

Q: Can we use the interview we're doing with you today? Do you give permission for us to use the story?

#20U: Yes. I am speaking honestly to say that I will answer any question you ask that does not go against the advice of His Holiness the Dalai Lama. However, I will not entertain anything else because for me there is none other than His Holiness the Dalai Lama in this world.

Q: Thank you for offering to share your story with us.

00:02:22

#20U: Okay.

Q: During this interview if you wish to take a break or stop at any time, please let me know.

#20U: Okay.

Q: If you do not wish to answer a question or talk about something, let me know.

#20U: Okay.

Q: If this interview was shown in Tibet or China, would this be a problem for you?

#20U: I have had no such experience so far and have not done anything to bring about problems, and in the future too, I do not think there will be any problem.

Q: We're honored to record your story and appreciate your participation in this project.

#20U: Okay.

Q: *Ama-la* 'respectful term for mother,' please tell us how old you are today?

#20U: [I] am 87 years old.

Q: 87 and where were you born?

00:03:59

#20U: The name of the place where I was born is Phenpo.

Q: Phenpo.

#20U: Phenpo is located behind Lhasa.

Q: Can you tell us a little bit about your childhood and what kind of experiences you had as a child?

#20U: [I] have not had much experience as a little child. It is the same as I told you [interpreter] yesterday [during the pre-interview] about being separated from the parents as a little child, having no parents, being brought up by the grandparents, and when older serving labor tax on account of the grandparents. [I] spent time doing labor tax and grew older in that way. There was not anything else. Mother had passed away when I was little and as for Father—just as told earlier—Father was a soldier and sent to the Chinese border. So I do not have much to say, except for living with the grandparents and being brought up by them.

Q: What kind of work did you do?

#20U: The work as a child as mentioned earlier was serving labor tax from the age of 13, serving tax for the leader. Then at the age of 17 or 18 [I] was given away in marriage, but it did not work out well and [I] came to India. Initially, [I] left on the pretext of going on pilgrimage that I spoke about yesterday. [I] came to India when His Holiness the Dalai Lama and the Panchen Lama visited India—came to India at that time.

Q: Well, before we hear more about that part of your life, could you tell me when you lived with your grandparents you were only a little girl. Were you paying taxes or did they have to pay taxes and you had to help them?

00:07:26

#20U: It was the grandparents. The grandparents brought me up since [I] did not have parents. So when [I] was a little bit older [I] had to go where the grandparents sent [me] to perform labor tax.

Q: Were they elderly people that they needed your help?

#20U: Yes, my grandmother had bad legs like I do. One had to serve labor from a young age and it continued when one grew old. [They] did not have good legs; Grandfather and Grandmother did not have good legs. Since I was healthier at around the age of 13, I was the one that had to go to perform labor tax.

Q: What did you do to perform the labor tax? What kind of work?

#20U: The work was this. There was a private estate in our village. There would be estates that belonged to *ladang* ‘treasury of a monastic household’ or monasteries. They managed the estates and we had to serve them. It could be either working in the house, in the fields or whatever it was demanded be done that day, we had to do it. The tenants, tenants in the village had to do it.

Q: So were your grandparents tenants of this land owned by...? Was it owned by a monastery or a *ladang*?

00:09:55

#20U: The private estate where we used to work long back belonged to a monastery. I can recall that the private estate belonged to a monastery called Digung Richi.

Q: Digung Richi?

#20U: Yes, it was the estate of Digung Richi and we had to do any kind of work that they wanted done.

Q: Were all the people in your village, were they all tenants working either for a monastery or for a private estate?

#20U: The 25 families in our village had to work for this private estate. There were two types of taxes: a big tax and a small tax. We whom were liable for the small tax worked in the estate and those with large land holdings were liable to pay a government tax as well. We were liable for just the village tax and did not have to pay any other tax.

Q: The Tibetan Government?

#20U: Yes, the Tibetan Government.

Q: If you were a smaller taxpayer, did your grandparents own any land or have animals that would, you know, that you had to pay taxes about for?

00:12:31

#20U: There was a small plot of land as a means of paying the tax. It was not a large plot of land but a small one. It was small and called *tel shing* ‘tax land.’

Q: Did they work that land? Did they grow any food there or graze animals on that land?

#20U: We grew crops, cultivated it. It was the grandparents’ *tel shing* and they had to cultivate it. The harvest was the means to pay the tax though it was not sufficient. It was the means to pay the tax, the source of sustenance.

Q: About how big was it? If you look around where we are, how large a piece of land was it?

#20U: In Tibet the standard measurement of land was the size of an area that could be plowed in a day called *montho*. An area that could be plowed in a day was called *montho*. [My grandparents] owned around two *montho*.

Q: And the land belonged to the estate, is that correct and you were just allowed to use it?

00:14:44

#20U: It was like this: The land was actually the government’s and the estate had given it to us, the tenants, as a means to pay taxes. [The estate] gave the land, but we had to do the cultivation ourselves—gave just a piece of vacant land, large enough for two days of plowing.

Q: You said there wasn’t enough land to sustain you. So where did you get the rest of your food and nurturing?

#20U: As I mentioned yesterday one kept borrowing, taking loans upon loans and then the interest kept compounding. It had come to such an occurrence that the people could hardly endure. Such had been happening.

Q: What did the people do when they could no longer endure it?

00:16:24

#20U: Much later and just before Tibet was lost, thanks to the benevolence of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, it was proclaimed that except for repaying the principal amount, the compounded interest thereof had to be written off. His Holiness the Dalai Lama wrote this off. Except for this, I was a child then, but it seems that had been the case since the time of my parents.

Q: So you had to help pay off that loan. What kind of work did you do as a little girl, *ama-la*?

#20U: When [I] was very little, that was it...most of the time in Tibet it was serving labor tax and at the very young age of 4, 5 or 6 [I] went to graze cows—herded the animals. At around the age of 5 or 6, as a little one [I] went to graze cows in Tibet since there was no one at home. Then at the older age of 12 or 13, it was serving labor tax. My life in Tibet was serving labor tax—working in the field and serving labor tax.

Q: The labor tax is actually your having to work in order to have that land that your grandparents lived on, correct? It was like paying off that land or renting that land?

00:19:00

#20U: Yes, doing labor tax was like that [rent for the land].

Q: Can you tell us some of the...13...farming...from 13 until you left Tibet you were spending your whole time doing that?

#20U: It was doing just that. Earlier [I] was working for the grandparents and then was given away in marriage. And the family [I] married into had to pay the same kind of tax. So it was just performing [labor] tax.

Q: Did that mean...Was your childhood and your young teenage years, was it very sad or hard for you?

#20U: The sadness was initially of being separated from the parents at a young age—of not having parents—and secondly, it was continuing to perform labor tax. At the place of serving labor tax [I] was too young. Children were not allowed to serve labor tax. [I] was told that children were not allowed to serve labor tax and faced a lot of problems, and used to get beaten a little, but what could be done?

Q: Your grandparents, did they pick somebody for you to marry? Was that and how old were you when they wanted to have you married?

00:21:33

#20U: Yes, the grandparents gave [me] away in marriage for one's life must be settled, which was according to the practice in Tibet. So the grandparents gave me away in marriage and when I came to India it was from that family. It was not from the home of my grandparents, but from the home of the family [I] married into.

Q: How old were you when you were given away as a bride?

#20U: I was given away as a bride at the age of 18 and had a child at the age of 20. At the age of 25 when I was in the *kag* 'barrier' year, the child passed away. [We] have not been able to return [to Tibet] after coming to India.

Q: Why did your grandparents give you away in marriage? Because didn't they need you to help them pay the tax?

00:23:06

#20U: Grandparents had children; grandparents had four adult sons. Some were sent to the army and some worked as stonemasons; [they] worked outside. I was always at home and normally girls are not kept at home. So I was given away in marriage and they continued to live on their land.

Q: Did you know the man that they gave you away in marriage to?

#20U: The man I was given away in marriage, he and I separated in India.

Q: No, did you know the man before marriage?

#20U: Our villages were a little further apart like Dekyiling [India], this place and Rajpur. The villages were a little further apart.

Q: Did [you] know each other?

#20U: [We] knew each other.

Q: Were you happy to get married?

#20U: [I] was not happy. You cannot be happy leaving your house, but as per custom one had to go, come what may.

Q: And then did you live in your own home or did you live with the man's family?

00:25:05

#20U: [I] moved into the man's house and lived there. I left for India from this house. People were going away when it was heard that His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Panchen Lama were on pilgrimage to India. So the two of us sort of ran away—sort of ran away—and we reached India. Then [we] went to Mount Kailash and other places and were unable to return for a year or two. Then Tibet was lost and when our Buddha [His Holiness the Dalai Lama] had to come to India, there was nowhere for us to go back to; our country was lost.

Q: Your trip out of India was the same year...out of Tibet was the same year that His Holiness was in India and did you go to where he was or just go to India?

#20U: [Speaks before translation is complete] Yes, that was the year when the Panchen Rinpoche and His Holiness the Dalai Lama went on a pilgrimage. I have been in India since that year. I was already here before the Chinese invaded. I have not seen any suffering caused by the Chinese. I have not undergone any suffering nor witnessed anyone been subjected to suffering.

Q: *Ama-la*, what was that like to go from, you know, to go from Tibet and then go to India for the first time, such a big change in climate and in country? What was that like for you as a young wife?

00:27:56

#20U: At that time we saw the Buddha [His Holiness the Dalai Lama] who was on pilgrimage and experienced such happiness, as none in the world would have. [We] felt incredibly happy seeing His Holiness the Dalai Lama, the Panchen Lama and many other lamas and arriving in such a happy country. The Buddha had advised then, "Go on

pilgrimage, practice the dharma and make offerings. There will not be good times like this. You must practice and make offerings.” We did not have the means to make offerings and went to see Mount Kailash. So for a year [we] went to Mt. Kailash. We were two years and then could not return to Tibet.

Q: Where did you see His Holiness and the Panchen Lama in India? Where?

#20U: [We] saw [His Holiness and the Panchen Lama] in Bodh Gaya, in Varanasi; saw [them] in Varanasi and Bodh Gaya for many days. We went to see wherever [they] went. We would remain hungry the whole day to go to see [them]—longing to see the Buddha.

Q: Yeah, I wondered. How did you...it doesn't sound like you had a lot of money in your...maybe you did in your family. How did you get the money to make such a trip?

00:30:23

#20U: India is very beneficial and did not charge us train fare. We traveled ticketless; did not pay train fare wherever [we] traveled. [Laughs] During summertime [we] went to Shimla to work as coolies and came down to the plains during winter to do some trading for a month. It was the plan to return to Tibet, but Tibet was lost and His Holiness the Dalai Lama arrived in Mussoorie. Then we could not go back. That was why [we] had to stay back.

Q: So then...I don't understand...if you went to India, to Bodh Gaya to see His Holiness and meet with him in Varanasi, when did you go to Mt. Kailash?

#20U: [They] arrived in the winter; the Panchen Lama and His Holiness the Dalai Lama arrived in winter, in the winter months. After winter got over, we left in the spring, in around February, went to Mt. Kailash in February or March all the way on foot.

Q: From India, from Bodh Gaya you walked to Mt. Kailash?

00:32:38

#20U: From Bodh Gaya to the Indian border as I mentioned earlier [we] traveled ticketless by Indian trains. The Indian Government is very beneficial and did not charge us. On seeing us the ticket collectors said, “Tibetan soldiers are here” and did not ask for any payment. That was how we went until the border without paying train fare because there was no money. From the place called Almora, [we] went walking.

Q: Why were you able to travel without pay on the trains? Why was that?

#20U: The train ticket collectors seem to be familiar. The Indian Government is very beneficial. It was not because we were competent, but because of the benevolence of the government that may have instructed, “Do not cause suffering and do not charge any fare [for the Tibetans]. If the fare is paid, good, and if otherwise, [Tibetans] should not be assaulted.” They would say to us at the door, “Go, soldiers.” [We] did not pay a penny as fare. Please say that [the Indian Government] is very beneficial. Please say that the Indian Government is very beneficial.

Q: How did you...how long did you stay at Mt. Kailash?

00:34:45

#20U: We could stay only two weeks at Mt. Kailash. The Tibetan Government hoisted a flag at Mt. Kailash—hoisted a flag on the 15th day of the 4th Tibetan lunar month. After the hoisting of the flag, we...those people that were fit could circumambulate Mt. Kailash two or three times, but the weak ones like us could do it only once, as the distance was great. Then we went to Lake Manasarovar and then came back to India.

Q: What year was that, *ama-la*? Do you remember?

#20U: Nineteen hundred...I cannot recall. When Tibet was lost, it was the year...when was it? '59, right? If it was '59...We arrived here around '53-'54...Perhaps it was '53 when we arrived here. [I] cannot recollect.

Q: So you left, you left Tibet before it was lost, before Lhasa was lost. Why did you do that? Why did you go to India if Tibet was still safe?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: On pilgrimage, when the Dalai Lama and the Panchen Lama left for pilgrimage in 1956-7, I think.

Q: '56-'7, you went down to join them and then went back to Mt. Kailash and then Tibet fell somewhere, and then came...okay. I see.

00:37:12

#20U: Have I said too much?

Q: That was quite a long pilgrimage—quite a long pilgrimage.

#20U: Yes, and living in India since [I] have been going on pilgrimages. The man I was married to earlier went after another woman. Later I met the husband I am presently with. He was an old man who was much older than me. We kept going on pilgrimages; visited Bodh Gaya and Varanasi every year.

Q: How old is your friend?

#20U: [He] was much older than me, around 16 years older than me, and it has been 20 years since he passed away. It has been 20 years since he passed away. [He] passed away in Bodh Gaya.

Q: That's nice; he passed away in Bodh Gaya.

#20U: Yes, in Bodh Gaya.

Q: What are some of your favorite memories of those pilgrimages, *ama-la*? You've done many, many. What is it you like about going on pilgrimage?

00:39:07

#20U: The favorite memory is of Varanasi and Bodh Gaya, which [I] visited every year. We can see all the lamas and make any offerings, if available, here. I remember this very much.

Q: What do you pray for when you go?

#20U: For one, I pray that all sentient beings have happiness and not face problems. Then [I] pray that Tibet gets independence and that during the lifetime of His Holiness the Dalai Lama...That the unfortunate Tibetans get to return to Tibet before His Holiness the Dalai Lama passes away. [I] pray like this every day.

Q: *Ama-la*, how do you go on pilgrimage now to these places? They are pretty far away. How do you get there? How do you go?

#20U: It has been two years and 8 months since I joined the Home for the Aged. Since then I have not been able to visit Bodh Gaya. There is no assistance, nobody going and permission is not granted to leave from here. Otherwise, I used to do that every year. We did some trading during summertime and...Earlier when [we] did not have anything, [we] traveled ticketless on trains and during summertime worked as coolies and went to Bodh Gaya in the winter. [I] knitted sweaters to sell and struggled like that to make a living knowing that without struggle one cannot survive just like [I] struggled in Tibet serving labor tax. Since Tibet [I] am familiar with struggling and did not think it was hard.

Q: Is there some reason why they don't let people go from here?

00:42:27

#20U: You do not have funds for the travel. When you cannot work there are no funds for travel. If the organization does not pay, the time to travel has ceased.

When the limbs are also weak and there is no money in the pocket, it is difficult to go on pilgrimage.

Q: *Ama-la*, maybe in wrapping up you could tell us what are your wishes and hopes for Tibet? You've been a woman who loves travelling on pilgrimage and praying. So today what do you wish for Tibet?

#20U: Now the body is weak and the age advanced. Every morning and evening [I] pray, "May His Holiness the Dalai Lama live long. Deities, lamas, dakinis and guardians protecting the dharma, please look justly into the karmic consequences and help Tibet." Like this [I] pray every day. Except for praying, I can do nothing. I do not possess the strength to do any work. Had one been a member of an organization in the past, one would have some experience, but I have none, having always engaged in farming, and posses no ability.

Q: What do you pray for Tibet?

00:44:20

#20U: [Joins palms] The lives of those like me have come to an end. However, the younger generation should be able to say, “This is our country. Tibet is ours. The face of the All Knowing is the face.” [I] pray like this in the morning and at night.

Q: That’s a very beautiful prayer, *ama-la*. Thank you for sharing your story with us.

#20U: There is nothing [I] can do besides pray. The thought is always there in the mind and at times [I] lie down, but am unable to sleep thinking about what happened to Tibet. Most of the parents and relatives were left behind in Tibet and [I] wonder how they are leading their lives for we will never meet. It is there in the mind, but what to do? [Becomes emotional]

Q: Well, you have done something today. You have shared your story so we can share a part of the history of Tibet from your experiences with the world.

00:46:19

#20U: [Joins palms] Thank you, thank you, thank you.

Q: *Ama-la*, thank you so much for this interview.

#20U: Okay. Thank you. I beseech that our younger generation get to claim Tibet as our own before any obstruction occurs in the life of His Holiness the Dalai Lama. [I] pray every morning while making offerings of butter lamps and water. I do not have any other way of making an effort.

Q: That would be beautiful.

END OF INTERVIEW